
GUEST VIEWPOINT

Health care system got you down? Speak up

By Frank Turner

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In a guest viewpoint last October, I announced the publication of the Health Report to the American People.

This document was produced by the Citizens' Health Care Working Group, established by the Medicare Improvement Act of 2003 to initiate public dialogue on health care reform. It is working. This dialogue has been taking place all across the country, including in Eugene. Sens. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., and Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, authored the legislation that established the CHCWG. Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Ore., sent a message of support as the group met in Eugene April 18. It looks like both parties are interested in this.

This public dialogue will pause at the end of this month. The CHCWG needs to incorporate the comments and opinion polls into a set of draft legislative recommendations. These will be published soon for a 90-day period of public comment.

After 90 days, the draft recommendations go to our president for comment, and to Congress for hearings, probably after the November elections. The president cannot prevent the hearings, and the law specifies that hearings shall be held before the five relevant House and Senate committees.

The senators and representatives should get quite an earful. The CHCWG has published the raw results of its public discussions on its Web site (www.citizenshealthcare.gov). More detailed information will be made available in coming weeks and months.

Before the ship hits it, I'd like to try to present some well-established facts.

- 1) The American health care system is the costliest in the world, both in actual dollars and as a fraction of gross domestic product. It costs as much to deliver health care as it does to run the federal government - \$2 trillion a year, 15 percent of our GDP, about \$6,000 per year for every man, woman and child in the nation.
- 2) Half of the \$2 trillion is spent for the benefit of 5 percent of the population.
- 3) Older folks need more care; the annual cost for the average Medicare patient is twice the cost for the average person under 65.
- 4) Many, many people in this country, mostly low-paid workers, are without health

insurance. Even though they are poor and uninsured, they pay Medicare taxes to provide medical services for the oldest (and wealthiest) age group.

5) When the uninsured have an illness, they tend to hope it goes away by itself, rather than seeking attention. If they do go to the emergency room, they often can't pay the bill, and we wind up paying it on their behalf, through our insurance and out-of-pocket payments to the hospital.

6) Private health insurance is involved in processing the payments for about one half of the \$2 trillion. Almost all private insurance is provided for through employment, with the employee and the employer sharing the cost.

7) Government is involved in paying for about 60 percent of the \$2 trillion.

8) Wait a minute! Sixty percent and 50 percent add up to more than 100 percent! What's going on? Both the government, as an employer, and the private insurance companies are involved in paying the health-care costs of government employees and retirees. (The government also subsidizes private insurance by not collecting taxes on the bulk of the premiums.)

9) Health care costs are rising rapidly in all developed countries, even those with single-payer, universal, government-provided health care.

10) The United States has a huge and growing problem with health care. We are all responsible for causing it, and for fixing it.

We all have a responsibility to ourselves and to our descendents to change the situation. We all need to get familiar with the issues, the proposals, and the politics of it all. For a start, we can identify the values that we hold; fairness, effectiveness, and accountability come to mind as desirable features of our health care system.

I offer two opportunities for engagement in dialogue: First, learn about the CHCWG, review the meeting results and offer suggestions for incorporation into draft legislative recommendations by May 31. Review and comment on the draft recommendations starting late this summer, and encourage others to participate.

Second, learn about the Archimedes Movement, former Gov. John Kitzhaber's statewide dialogue project. Review the group's Web site (www.archimedesmovement.org), offer comments and attend a local "meetup" to provide feedback for legislative purposes.

Frank Turner, a Eugene physician, is available to speak to groups about the Citizens' Health Care Working Group (www.citizenshealthcare.gov) and other health related issues.

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